

Gorbachev's Need: A Diminished Russia

By Roman Szporluk

The Lithuanian secession crisis confronts Mikhail Gorbachev with a historic choice: whether to become a George Washington, the leader of a loosely tied and newly created association of free republics, or a George III, the defender of an empire under attack from all sides.

If he chooses to save the empire, his domestic reforms will fail and he will alienate pro-Western democrats throughout his country, including in Russia itself. If he opts for a genuine federalism, he will face the formidable task of persuading ethnic Russians to go along.

At the heart of the Soviet Union's nationalities problem lies a loss of legitimacy, for which Mr. Gorbachev

has himself to blame. Under his rule, Communism has been discredited and Marxist-Leninist ideology debunked — leaving an ideological void. Why shouldn't Lithuanians, Estonians, Georgians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis and others clamor for secession? (Jews, Soviet ethnic Germans and Armenians are seceding through emigration in increasing numbers.)

Some claim that Mr. Gorbachev has a plan to overthrow the Communist Party and establish a new legitimacy. But what kind of government does he plan to install in place of the party? He wants to reform the economy, establish a law-governed state and make his country a part of Europe — but what is his country?

This is not a theoretical question. Valentin Rasputin — a leading Russian nationalist whom Mr. Gorbachev recently appointed to the newly created Presidential Council — publicly raised the possibility of Russia's seceding from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. As Mr. Rasputin's remark shows, ethnic Russians are being forced to examine their status

A paradox to preserve the U.S.S.R.

as one of the nationalities in the Soviet Union, something they could avoid under previous Soviet regimes.

The biggest challenge to Mr. Gorbachev, then, may turn out to be the ethnic assertiveness of the Russian nation itself. The relationship between the Russian nation and the Soviet state is the central ethnic problem in the Soviet Union, not least because it defines the nature of other nationality problems.

The non-Russian nationalities define their agendas in light of their perception of the role of Russians in the Soviet state. They have identified Communism with Russia and view the Soviet Union as a state ruled by

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Russians. Their calls for secession (or emigration) reflect their fear that the survival, let alone autonomy, of the non-Russian peoples will never be secure in such a state. The recent emergence of a vocal, not to say vociferous, Russian ethnic nationalism does nothing to dispel those fears.

Nor do the ongoing revisions of the Soviet Constitution. The open aim of this exercise is to deny Lithuania the right to secede, which it has under the Soviet Constitution now in force. As a member of the Lithuanian Parliament put it the other day, the law now being adopted "isn't a law of secession. It's a law against secession."

This legal maneuvering does not inspire confidence in Mr. Gorbachev's commitment to the rule of law or a democratic federation of republics.

What would the Lithuanians, or other non-Russians, want from a federation? Above all they would want equal rights with Russia, including their own language, religion and culture in their own republics and local control of the government and economy.

On the other hand, the Russian nationalists, who oppose both Communism and the West, are advocating a state rooted in Russian values, one with a non-capitalist economic system and with the Russian language in a leading position everywhere. If this is denied, some, like Mr. Rasputin, would rather accept a smaller Russian state.

Most Russian nationalists, however, advocate keeping the non-Russian republics, such as Lithuania, by force if necessary. In that stand they find an ally in the army and K.G.B., as well as the Moscow bureaucracy. For them, the idea of "reducing" Russia to the status of an ordinary republic or of denying an essentially Russian character to the Soviet empire is anathema.

At this stage, none of the major Soviet nationalities, in particular the Ukrainians, are demanding secession. If Mr. Gorbachev can show them that genuine national freedom is attainable in a new federal structure, further secessionist movements might be forestalled.

Accomplishing that, however, will require more than fashioning a new constitution. First Mr. Gorbachev will have to create a liberal, pro-reform, non-chauvinistic Russian national consciousness that accepts a diminished Russia as one republic among equals. He must persuade Russian patriots that a lesser role is in the best interests of both Russia and the Soviet Union.

After that, creating the setting for the realization of economic and social programs should seem easier. As in Eastern Europe today, newly empowered republics might then be more willing to swallow painful reforms. □